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Fintan O'Toole. *White Savage: William Johnson and the Invention of America.* Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009. 402 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4384-2758-4.

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Dances with Beaver: Sir William Johnson on the American Frontier

Sir William Johnson is colonial America's very own Sasquatch, a mythical beast out there in the forest, known chiefly by hearsay and anecdote. Well, that may be stretching it a bit. To date, Bigfoot has not been knighted by the British Crown, nor has he left behind an archive of personal papers that fills fourteen volumes. But the fact remains that for as well documented as Johnson's life is, it seems to have inspired more novelists than historians, and we still lack a first-rate scholarly biography of him.

Enter Fintan O'Toole, an Irish journalist who has made Johnson his first subject in a projected trilogy on "America's myth of itself" (p. ix). Like other Johnson biographers before him, O'Toole has been drawn to his subject's larger-than-life qualities: his immigrant story of American success, his influence among the Iroquois, his military exploits in the French and Indian War, and his reputation as a lover of native women and as a feudal lord living on the fringe of civilization. This Johnson is so overstuffed with American archetypes that any biography runs the risk of rendering him as lifelike as a scarecrow. To O'Toole, he is the embodiment of the founding myth of America: "the White Savage, the virile, racially pure embodiment of American values who is yet at home in the wilderness because he had adopted the best of Indian culture" (p. 339).

O'Toole has found something else in Johnson. In addition to being an immigrant, entrepreneur, and diplomat, he was also an Irish Jacobite. Considering where he is calling from, it is not surprising that O'Toole spends so much time dissecting Johnson's Irish past. In fact, this book's distinguishing feature is that it takes its subject's Irish roots so seriously, returning to them repeatedly to help make sense of the trajectory of Johnson's life and career.

On both his mother's and father's sides, Johnson was descended from Catholic Irish gentry who had converted to Protestantism after 1689 to avoid the political and economic marginalization forced on their kind by the penal laws. The Warrens (his mother's family) weathered the transition well and made use of the new opportunities it opened for them within the British Empire. Johnson's maternal uncle Admiral Peter Warren became his first and most important patron in North America. Conversion took on a different meaning on the other side of the family. O'Toole describes Christopher Johnson, William's father, as an unreconstructed Jacobite who "learned how to live with the slow death of a defeated culture, how to keep his head down, how to hold his tongue, how to move amid undercurrents, how to survive" (p. 2). O'Toole ascribes William Johnson's penchant for manipulating identities and appearances not to the ambition he inherited from his uncle, but to the crypto-Jacobitism of his father.

Every historian who deals with William Johnson faces the same question: what accounted for his remarkable rapport with native peoples, particularly the Mohawks who were his closest neighbors? Romantics ascribe it to his love of their women; cynics, to his love of their land. O'Toole finds a certain spiritual and emotional kinship between the Irish and Native Americans. Both sides lived in a spiritually imbued landscape, a place of sacred springs, stones, and trees. Both were ancient warrior cultures in which men gained authority by exhibiting habits of generosity and by cultivating their powers of oratorical persuasion. Most important, both were also on the receiving end of Britain's imperial ambitions. As an émigré from Ireland to North America, Johnson traveled from one marchland of the empire to another, the embodiment of a "colonised people who became colonizers … 'savages' who came to see themselves as civilisers" (p. x). There was something about Johnson's Irishness, in other words, that made him receptive to the Indians, some unarticulated but shared experience that alerted him to their humanity and drew him toward their way

of life.

O'Toole is on the money when he describes the performative quality of Johnson's interaction with Indians. More so than any of his contemporaries (with the possible exception of Conrad Weiser), Johnson grasped what O'Toole calls the "ritual dimension of exchange in Indian cultures," that is, the hospitality, speech making, and gift giving that had to accompany any commercial or diplomatic encounter (p. 57). Other colonial traders and agents groused about the expensive and time-consuming nature of such exchange, but Johnson seemed to revel in it, and "his mastery of forms ... represented not an affront, but great courtesy" to the Iroquois (p. 164).

But is there sufficient evidence to attribute this unique quality in Johnson to his Irish background? Johnson was a doer, not a thinker. In his papers, there is little of what we might call reflective or introspective writing concerning his background or his relations with Native Americans. When pressed by correspondents to describe Indians, he wrote with the eye of a government bureaucrat, describing their numbers, locations, and political inclinations. O'Toole makes much of the few references in Johnson's papers to his Irish family and heritage, but celebrating St. Patrick's Day and trying to get a harper and a piper to join his domestic retinue at Johnson Hall did not prove that it was Johnson's Irishness that fueled his cultural affinity with the Iroquois.

The clues to Johnson's Jacobite sympathies that O'Toole teases out of these sources are even more tenuous. O'Toole argues that by hanging a map of Ireland in his home and seeking out Irish musicians, Johnson was "imagining himself as a Gaelic lord, an idealised feudal chieftan ... [who] gathered around him broken shards of the old Irish order," but the evidence that Johnson was reinventing himself as a loyal and dutiful imperial agent of the British Crown is more obvious and convincing (p. 304). For a supposed Jacobite, he certainly made no secret of his endorsement of the Church of England, working with the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel to support its missionary work among the Mohawks. Likewise, he mastered the role of the aspiring courtier with at least as much enthusiasm as he did that of the Indian chief by sticking his snout in the trough of royal patronage whenever he had the chance. Any fealty he may have felt toward the Catholicism of his ancestors fell quickly by the wayside when it came to challenging the Jesuit missionaries who vied with him for the hearts and souls of the Iroquois. In these and other ways, Johnson proved that he was the king's man through and through. His death in 1774 prevented him from taking up arms against the American rebels during the War for Independence, but his family's Canadian exile testifies to its intergenerational loyalty to the Hanoverian regime.

Questions about Johnson's alleged Jacobitism aside, there is much to recommend from O'Toole's treatment of his subject. The narrative moves with the spirited pace that such a storied life deserves, but does not fall prey to the legend making found in other Johnson biographies. Because he has not attempted an exhaustive biography, O'Toole avoids exhausting the reader. He presents his tale in short, impressionistic chapters that move between Johnson's private and public lives. The prose occasionally lingers too long in the dream-like state between myth and fact that O'Toole is trying to evoke, but his judgments regarding Johnson's political and military career are sound. O'Toole is too forgiving of Johnson's land jobbing, and he papers over this seamier side of the story when he describes Johnson-the-landlord as "part tribal chief and part bucolic patriarch" (p. 281). Johnson's attempts to fill his own pockets while doing the Crown's business surprised none of his contemporaries and should not surprise us now, but it did make him look much more like his peers than the "white savage" idealized in American art and literature.

Despite his indisputable fame during his lifetime, Johnson has not cast a long shadow in American history. The world he built in the Mohawk Valley–a world of Indian retainers and Irish tenants, of intermarriage and nepotism for his native and colonial dependents, of frontier rusticity and aristocratic pretension–collapsed with the coming of American independence. His literary legacy belongs not so much to Natty Bumppo, the "white savage" of James Fenimore Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales, as to James Bond and Harry Flashman, those globetrotting agents of Britain's imperial power.

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